

Robert W. Buchanan (1841-1901)

10 *Will o' the Wisp*

A ballad written for Clari, on a stormy night.

Just an inch high  
    With a body all yellow,  
A bright crimson eye  
And limbs all awry,  
    Wakes the queer little fellow— 5  
Yes, awakes in the night,  
Rubs his eyes in a fright,  
    Yawns, harks to the thunder,  
While the glowworms all set  
Round his cradle so wet, 10  
    Stare at him in wonder.  
How it blows! how it rains!  
How the thunder refrains!  
While the glowworms so wan,  
    As they gather together, 15  
Hear the quaint little man  
    Squeak faintly, 'What weather?'  
    'Who is his father?'  
    'Who is his mother?'  
They cry as they gather, 20  
    And puzzle, and pother—  
Such a queer little chap,  
Just new-born in a nap!  
And such antics are his  
    As he springs on his bed, 25  
Such a comical phiz,  
    Such a red,  
    Shining head!  
Hark again,  
'Midst the rain 30  
    How the deep thunder crashes!

And the lightning  
Is bright'ning  
    In fitful blue flashes!  
'Here's fun! here's a din!' 35  
Cries Will with a grin—  
'T'll join in the play—  
It's darker than pitch  
In this hole of a ditch,  
What a place to be born in—I'm off and away.' 40

Out on the heath  
    It rains with a will.  
The Wind sets his teeth  
    And whistles right shrill  
All is darkness and sound, 45  
    All is splishing and splashing;  
The pools on the ground  
    Glimmer wet in the flashing—  
Up and down, round and round,  
With a leap and a bound, 50  
    Goes the little one dashing.  
'Oh what fun!' out he screams  
At the wild blue beams  
    As they flicker and pass.  
Then he squats down and seems 55  
With his nose's red gleams  
    Like a lamp in the grass;—  
Then 'mid rain washing down, and the thunder still busy,  
He flies spinning round, till he pauses, half dizzy.

How dark and how still, 60  
In the arm of the hill,  
    Lies the hamlet asleep—  
While the wind is so shrill,  
    And the darkness so deep!  
Down the street all is dark, 65  
    And closed is each shutter;

But he pauses to mark,  
 His face like a spark  
     In the black polished gutter!  
 But see! what a streak 70  
     Gleams out from the inn!  
 Overhead with a creak,  
 And a groan and a squeak,  
     Shakes the sign; while the din  
     Comes harsh from within. 75  
 Hark!—the jingling of glasses,  
     The singers' refrain!  
 Will stops as he passes  
     And peeps through the pane,  
     Dripping, slippery with rain, 80  
 There they sit and they joke,  
 In the grey cloud of smoke,  
 While the jolly old host,  
     With his back to the fire,  
 Stands warm as a toast, 85  
     And doth smile and perspire.  
 Grave, thin, and pedantic,  
     The schoolmaster sits,  
 While, in argument frantic  
     With riotous wits, 90  
 The maker of boots  
     Still in apron of leather,  
 Thumps the board and disputes,  
     Contradicts and refutes;  
 And like sparrows collected, all birds of a feather, 95  
 All smoking long pipes, and all nodding together,  
 The Wiseacres gather, screen'd snug from the weather.

Great, broad, and brown,  
     Stands the jug on the board,  
     And the ale is poured, 100  
 And they quaff it down.  
 How it froths, fresh and strong,

Warm, sweet, full of spice!  
 Will's beginning to long  
     For a sip,—'tis so nice! 105  
 So he whispers the Wind,  
     Who runs round from the lane,  
 And they creep in behind,  
 And the Wind tries to find  
     An entrance in vain. 110  
 Then 'The Chimney!' cries Will,  
 While the Wind laughs out shrill,  
 And he leaps at one bound  
     To the roof up on high,  
 While the chimneys all round 115  
     Tremble and cry.

One moment he pauses  
     Up yonder, and draws his  
     Breath deep and strong,  
 Then dives like a snake, 120  
 While the dwelling doth quake,  
     To the room where they throng.  
 Ho, ho! with one blow  
 Out the lights go,  
     Dark and silent is all. 125  
 But the fire burns low  
     With its ghost on the wall.  
 'What a night! Ah, here's weather!'  
 All murmur together  
     With voices sunk low, 130  
 While softly slips Will  
 In the jug, drinks his fill,  
     And is turning to go,  
 When a hand, while none mark,  
     Lifts the jug in the dark; 135  
 'Tis the cobbler so dry  
     Seeks to drink on the sly!  
 Tarala! pirouette!

Will springs at his nose,  
 The jug is upset, 140  
 And the liquor o'erflows.  
 'What's that?' all exclaim,  
 Leaping up with a shout,  
 While the cobbler in shame,  
 With nose all aflame, 145  
 Cries, 'The *Devil*, no doubt!  
 And as fresh lights are brought  
 These birds of a feather  
 Think it quite a new thought  
 To nod gravely together, 150  
 Crying hot and distraught,  
 'Well, indeed! this *is* weather!'

Tarala! pirouette!  
 Out again in the wet!  
 Like a small dancing spark, 155  
 With his face flashing bright  
 In the black dripping dark,  
 Goes the elf of the night.  
 Hark! from the church-tower,  
 Slowly chimeth the hour! 160  
 Twelve times low and deep,  
 Comes the chime through the shower  
 On the village asleep;—  
 And where ivies enfold  
 The belfry, doth sit, 165  
 Huddled up from the cold,  
 The owl grey and old,  
 With 'Toowhoo' and 'Tcowhit!  
 'Heigho!'—yawns poor Will—  
 'Time for bed, by the powers!' 170  
 And he lights on a sill,  
 Among flower-pots and flowers,  
 And just as he seems  
 To slumber inclined,

A white hand forth-gleams 175  
     From within, and the blind  
 Is drawn back, and oh dear!  
     What a beautiful sight!  
 Clari's face doth appear  
     Looking out at the night. 180  
 And Clari doth stand,  
 With the lamp in her hand,  
     In her bedgown of white—  
 Her hair runs like gold on her shoulders, and fills  
 With gleams of gold-shadow her tucks and her frills, 185  
 And her face is as sweet as a star, and below  
 Her toes are like rosebuds that peep among snow.

Breathless with wonder,  
     Quiet and still,  
 He crouches under 190  
     The pots on the sill;  
 Then the blind closes slow,  
     And the vision doth fade,  
 But still to and fro  
     On the blind moves the shade— 195  
 There! out goes the light!  
     Will lifts up his head,  
 All is darker than night,  
     She is creeping to bed.  
 Oh, light be her rest! 200  
 She steals into her nest,  
     Without a beholder,  
 And the bed, soft and warm,  
 Swells up round her form  
     To receive and enfold her! 205

[The wind is increasing,  
 But the rain is ceasing,  
 And blown up from the west  
     Comes the moon wan and high,

With a cloud on her crest, 210  
     And a tear in her eye.  
 Distraught and opprest,  
     She drifts wearily by!

‘Heigho!’ yawns poor Will—  
 Still crouch’d down on the sill— 215  
     ‘How sleepy I feel!  
 There’s a cranny up there  
 To let in the fresh air,—  
     Here goes! in I’ll steal!’  
 So said and so done, 220  
     And he enters the room

Where the dainty-limb’d one, like a lily in bloom,  
 Her face a dim brightness, her breath a perfume,  
 Sleeps softly. With noiseless invisible tread  
 The wanderer steals to the side of the bed 225  
 Where she lies, oh how fair! so sweet and so warm,  
 While the white clothes sink round the soft mould of her  
     form;

One hand props her cheek, and one unespied  
 Lies rising and falling upon her soft side.  
 Will floats to and fro, and the light that he throws 230  
 Just lights this or that as she lies in repose,  
 Leaving all the rest dark. See! he hops ’mong her hair  
 And shines like a jewel;—then leans down to stare  
 In her face,—and his ray as he trembles and spies  
 Just flashes against the white lids of her eyes;— 235  
 While her breath—oh her breath is so sweet and so fine,  
 Will drinks and turns dizzy—his joy is divine,  
 And his light flashing down shows the red lips apart,  
 To free the deep fragrance that steals from her heart

Just an inch high, 240  
     With a body all yellow,  
 A bright crimson eye,  
 And limbs all awry,

Stands the queer little fellow!  
 And Clari's sweet mouth 245  
 Just a little asunder,  
 Sweet with spice from the South,  
 Fills his spirit with wonder:  
 Such a warm little mouth!  
 Such a red little mouth! 250  
 The thin bud above and the plump blossom under!  
 'Heigho, heart's alive!  
 Here's a door, here I'll rest!  
 And he takes one quick dive  
 And slips into her breast! 255  
 And there may he thrive  
 Like a bird in a nest!  
 And Clari turns over  
 And flushes and sighs,  
 Pushes back the warm cover, 260  
 Half opens her eyes,  
 Then sinking again  
 Warm, languid, and bright,  
 With new bliss in her brain,  
 Dreams—such dreams—of delight! 265  
 She tosses and turns  
 In visions divine;  
 For within her Will burns  
 Like a lamp in a shrine!

. . . And now you've the reason that Clari is gay, 270  
 As a bird on the bough or a brooklet at play;  
 And now you've the reason why Clari is bright,  
 Why she smiles all the day and is glad all the night;  
 For the light having entered her bosom remains,  
 Darts fire to her glances and warmth thro her veins, 275  
 Makes her tricky and merry, yet full of the power  
 Of the wind and the rain, and the storm and the shower;  
 Half wise in the ways of the world, and half simple,  
 As sly as a kiss is, as deep as a dimple,



A spirit that sings like a bird on a tree,—  
'I love my love, and my love loves me!'

280

*1882*

(From *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Buchanan*.  
2 vols. 1901; New York, 1976)